

Social theorist André Gorz dies, aged 84

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9 October 2007

On September 24, the economist and social theorist André Gorz, 84, committed suicide together with his wife in their house near Paris. The couple had made a pact to end their lives together following a prolonged illness on the part of Gorz's beloved wife, Dorine.

For a number of decades towards the end of the twentieth century, Gorz played a central role in the elaboration of theories relating to the role of labour and the working class in capitalist society. In particular, Gorz's rejection of the working class as a force for social progress in his book *Farewell to the Working Class* (1980) was eagerly espoused by layers of the so-called European "New Left," and his theories became the theoretical underpinning for policies adopted by sections of the western European trade unions and the Green movement.

Born Gerard Horst in Vienna in 1923, Gorz grew up in a fractious, unhappy family consisting of a Catholic mother and Jewish father. His mother changed his name to Gorz to disguise his Jewish roots. As a boy, Gorz sought to resolve his unhappy childhood through a series of abrupt affiliations—first at the age of 12 with strict Catholicism, and then just a year later with even a brief flirtation with Nazism.

Moving to Switzerland as a young man, Gorz met the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in Lausanne in 1946. A principal factor in Gorz's move to France at the end of the Second World War was his enthusiasm for Sartre's writings. Amid the turmoil of postwar Europe, and under conditions where the atrocities committed by fascists in both Germany and France were increasingly coming to light, Gorz—the ex-Jewish, ex-Austrian citizen—found solace in the nihilist traits of Sartre's philosophy. Sartre's existentialist philosophy, which held the promise of unbridled freedom for the individual, appealed to the young intellectual who, in his autobiographical book *The Traitor* (1958), described himself as a "nullity rejected by the world."

Gorz commenced a career as a writer and journalist in postwar France working closely with Sartre. In 1954, Gorz co-founded the influential French magazine *Nouvel Observateur* and in 1961 took over as political director of Sartre's magazine *Les Temps Modernes*.

Like Sartre and many other postwar French intellectuals, Gorz's political evolution took place under the auspices of the most influential party of the left—the French Communist Party (PCF). In the first legislative elections after the war (1946), the PCF had won the largest share of the vote (28.6 percent). In *The Traitor*, Gorz declares that the ultimate objective of any intellectual was to join the Communist Party.

Gorz's enthusiasm for the Communist Party waned (together with Sartre's) following the crushing of the Hungarian workers' uprising by Russian tanks in 1956. But both Gorz and Sartre failed to draw any fundamental lessons from the emergence of Stalinism in Russia in the 1920s and the domination of Moscow over the French Communist Party. While Sartre turned increasingly to the so-called Third World and the advocacy of such figures as Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse-tung as role models for "anti-imperialist" politics, Gorz first formulated a strategy of so-called "revolutionary reforms" for the working-class movement in developed Western countries with his book *Strategy for Labour* (1964).

Gorz made clear that he completely rejected any notion of a Leninist-

type party to lead the working class. Instead, in the mid-1960s, Gorz discovered a "new working class" of skilled technicians capable of exerting pressure in the factories and trade unions for his self-proclaimed revolutionary reforms. Gorz spelt out what he meant by such reforms in his book published three years later, *Socialism and Revolution* (1967).

Socialism, he writes, "can be brought about only by deliberate, long-term action of which the beginning may be a scaled series of reforms, but which as it unfolds must grow into a series of trials of strength, more or less violent, some won and others lost, but of which the outcome will be to mould and organise the socialist resolve and consciousness of the working class."

Gorz's demands for reforms centred on the factories became a key element in the French *autogestion* movement—an anarchist-type movement that concentrated on the demand for workers' self-control in factories. This concentration on militancy within the factory at the expense of broader political questions played an important role in diverting attention away from the treacherous role carried out by the French Communist Party in the revolutionary movement of students and workers in Paris in 1968.

Following the restabilisation of French capitalism due to the betrayal of the PCF in 1968, Gorz renewed his analysis of the development of capitalist society and revised his theories. In the 1970s, Gorz increasingly turned to the ecology movement and, in particular, the works of Ivan Illich, who had launched his own broad attack on many aspects of modern culture, including centralised education and its concentration on consumerism and production at the expense of the freedom of the individual. Gorz went on to integrate and articulate the implications of such a "limits to growth" theory for those layers of the middle class who, in the 1970s, were increasingly turning away from social democracy and the Communist Party in favour of ecological and Green politics.

Over this same period, Gorz also shifted his standpoint with regard to the division of labour. In his early works, Gorz described the division of labour and the resulting alienation of the worker as a historically necessary evil to be surmounted through the overthrow of capitalism—in line with the analysis of Karl Marx. Now, in the 1970s, Gorz depicted alienation arising from the labour process as an *ineradicable* feature of any complex modern society. For Gorz, alienation is inherent in the very socialisation of the process of production, and not merely in the capitalist form of its organisation.

In his book *Division of Labour*, Gorz refutes the Marxist conception that identifies production for profit and the private ownership of the means of production as the source of social oppression. For Gorz, technology is the principal problem. He writes: "It is the technology of the factory that imposes a certain technical division of labour, which in turn requires a certain type of subordination, hierarchy, and despotism. Thus technology is apparently the matrix and the ultimate cause of everything...." For Gorz, workers' control of production would change nothing. Social progress was to be sought beyond the production process and the sphere of economics.

Farewell to the Working Class

Having rejected the Marxist conception of society, Gorz went on to draw the inevitable conclusion—the impotency of the working class. One year before the accession to power of a coalition between the PCF and the Socialist Party led by Francois Mitterrand in France, Gorz published the book that most clearly delineated his break with Marxist and socialist ideas—*Farewell to the Working Class* (1980).

In this book, Gorz provided the arguments upon which an entire layer of the radical left wing and intelligentsia in France and elsewhere finally broke with any adherence to the working class as a force for change.

Based on a superficial analysis of statistical evidence that demonstrated a decline in the numbers of industrial workers in Western developed societies, Gorz concluded that those layers of the working class involved in organised production were a privileged minority and incapable of playing a progressive role in social transformation.

Drawing upon his previous rejection of production and technology, Gorz argued that the only potentially progressive social force was those sections of society not involved in productive work—what he called “the non-class of non-workers.” For Gorz, this category embraced the unemployed and underemployed who could, under transformed conditions, play the role of a revolutionary subject. Gorz’s vision of social change taking place entirely independent of material factors assumes an unabashed voluntarist form when he declares:

“The realm of freedom can never arise out of material processes; it can only be established as a constitutive act which, aware of its free subjectivity, asserts itself as an absolute end in itself within each individual. Only the non-class of non-producers is capable of such an act. For it alone embodies what lies beyond productivism: the rejection of the accumulation ethic and the dissolution of all classes” (p. 74).

In an interview published one year after the publication of *Farewell to the Working Class* in English, Gorz was even more explicit about his rejection of the working class: “One of the things I have tried to show is that the working class is structurally incapable of taking control of production and society.” And later in the interview, he returns to the same theme: “The post-industrial neo-proletariat is obviously incapable of seizing power and the same goes for the traditional working class. No strategy or tactic for seizing power can resist the current repressive counterrevolutionary capabilities of the modern state.”

Gorz’s repudiation of the working class and depiction of the state as an omnipotent monolith was eagerly taken up by those active in the trade union headquarters and Green movement who at the same time sought to integrate a number of his concrete proposals into their programme. In line with his advocacy of the merits of the unemployed and underemployed as a new progressive force, Gorz declared that the mass unemployment in Western capitalist countries arising from the introduction of new technology should actually be welcomed. According to Gorz, the ongoing revolution in productive technology enabling employers to shed labour could be seized as a historically unprecedented opportunity to “abolish” work in favour of what Gorz variously termed “autonomous activity” or “work-for-oneself”—i.e., activity conducted without a wage on behalf of the interests of the individual.

His notion of liberation independently of the productive process found fruition, for example, in the 1989 programme of the Irish Greens, which stated: “Full employment for all adult human beings would be a social and ecological nightmare.” (!)

Gorz also proposed other measures that were increasingly taken up by Green parties, and later by the anti-globalisation Attac movement, such as encouraging small and middle class businesses as a counterweight to big business and the banks. Gorz expressed his enthusiasm for such initiatives as the Local Employment Trading System (LETSystem)—i.e., non-profit associations of community businesses and individuals in which members exchange goods and services using local currencies. According to Gorz, such small businesses can help subvert the power of global capital because

“local currency abolishes the fetishism of money...and merchandise, encouraging reflection on needs and deterring wastefulness.”

While he dismissed the working class in *Farewell to the Working Class*, Gorz continued to extol the role of trade unions in social struggles, calling for a new type of unionism combined with vaguely defined “social movements” aimed at subverting a work-based society in favour of “imaginative” ideas for the exploitation of leisure time. His notions were to be taken up by sections of the trade union movement in Italy, Germany and France, which used many of Gorz’s arguments to push for a shorter working week or campaigns for the payment of a universal social wage.

The shipwreck of Gorz’s “socialist utopia”

In his later writings, *Paths to Paradise*, *Critique of Economic Reason*, and *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology*, Gorz continued to drape his proposals in the mantle of socialism while at the same time explicitly stressing the *utopian* nature of his enterprise.

“A new utopia is needed if we are to safeguard what the ethical content of the socialist utopia provided; the utopia of a society of free time. The emancipation of individuals, their full development, the restructuring of society, are all achieved through the liberation from work” (*Critique of Economic Reason*, 1989).

Gorz’s advocacy of a “socialist utopia” based on individual liberation divorced from production and consumerism recalls much of the writings of the German-American theorist Herbert Marcuse as well as more contemporary theorists, such as Zygmunt Baumann. In fact, the task of realising Gorz’s “utopia” fell into the hands of the hardened bureaucratic trade union leaders of such organisations as the IG Metall in Germany and the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT— French Democratic Confederation of Labour).

In 1984, the IG Metall union successfully implemented a 35-hour week for many of its members working in industry following a seven-week strike. The strike came at the end of a series of struggles by workers in Germany for better wages and conditions, and for a brief period in the late seventies and early eighties, it appeared as if some of Gorz’s initiatives could genuinely benefit some layers of workers. However, a renewed offensive by the bourgeoisie, in the form of policies introduced by such figures as Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain and Ronald Reagan in America, finally shipwrecked any possibility of winning extensive reforms.

Gorz’s proposals for a “liberation from work” were always based on the premise of an expanding welfare state. But the accelerating process of the globalisation of production based on entirely new technologies first developed in the 1970s stripped away the possibility for national concessions and an extension of the social welfare state. In one country after the other, the business and political elite began a systematic campaign to dismantle existing social gains and attack workers’ wages and working conditions.

In France, the left government of Francois Mitterrand (including four ministers from the PCF) elected in 1981 quickly capitulated to pressure from the markets, junked its own programme of “revolutionary reforms” and commenced a campaign of systematic attacks on the working class.

In Germany, the deal reached by the IG Metall over a shorter working week failed to yield any long-term benefits for workers. Instead bureaucrats justified new concessions to employers on the basis of arguments developed by Gorz—i.e., the necessity to adapt to “changes in the world of work” and the emergence of new “social layers with different working expectations.” Increasingly, new deals struck by the trade unions became the basis upon which managements institutionalised increased flexibility in the workforce with no corresponding increase in income. In practice, shorter-working-week agreements have become a key element in allowing management to break up the traditional concept of a full-time job with an adequate wage in favour of a host of forms of low-wage labour

based on flexible shifts and the dismantling of previous forms of contractual guarantee.

In a number of major companies, the IG Metall is now actively seeking to restore the 40-hour week (e.g., at Siemens in 2004). At the same time, recent statistics have revealed that during a period largely dominated by the rule of a Social Democratic-Green Party government (1998-2007), workers' wages have stagnated in Germany, under conditions where profits for major companies and salaries for management have risen by leaps and bounds. In the space of a few short decades, history has delivered its own harsh judgement on Gorz's repeated attempts, over four decades, to breath new life into a programme of a radical reform.

Two centuries ago, the founders of scientific socialism, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, delivered their own withering critique of the limited conceptions of the early utopian socialists, which they declared to be a "kind of eclectic, average socialism," a "mish-mash." Today, Gorz's own failed "eclectic mish-mash" of utopian policies, based on the rejection of the working class, serves as a political cover for layers of the petty bourgeois and the trade union bureaucracy—including many former radicals—who now occupy ministerial posts in a number of European governments, and are implementing thoroughly reactionary social policies at the behest of big business and financial interests.



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